Alienation and the Mental Health Crisis in Britain - Daniel Moir - 21/02/25

Karl Marx is most famous for his various critiques of capitalism, one of which is of its alienation of workers. Marx argues that a workforce in a capitalist economy is alienated from their produce, meaning they are estranged from the total production process, from decision making both about said process and about its sale as well as from the profit made from its sale. In short the workforce that produces a product has no attachment to it and thus lacks agency. This results in a society of workers who are enslaved by the production of commodities alien to them, and who have become detached and careless towards the products of their labour. Marx, in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1964) additionally argues that as capitalist division of labour alienates man from the product of his labour it is additionally alienating man from his fellow men, whose social bond is overruled by currency. This happens because as a workforce of teamwork is replaced by a taylorist production line and a society of solidarity is replaced by one of hyper-individualistic competition, the bonds between colleagues and communities become secondary to the accumulation of wealth, which in turn only furthers the divide between competing self-interested individuals. The commodification of an individual's labour power thus detaches them from their work and community which aids capitalism's continuation by destroying community and solidarity between the working class, leaving every man for himself. This leads Marxists to argue that capitalism's inherent contradictions and its subsequent endless recession cycle lead to the creation of an anxious and frustrated society, one that can only be combatted with the abolition of private property and of the anarchy of the profit-driven system. The anxious and paranoid society created by capitalism's contradictions and the alienation they produce drives a wedge between the worker and their community and heightens their anxiety about the future, this then drives an individual toward competition and suspicion which pushes society toward an all encompassing mass loneliness where neighbours know not each others names, colleagues do not socialise and the extended family, the 'village' needed to raise a family, is reduced to a nuclear family with extended members only included if they are beneficial in some material manner. Therefore it is Marx's argument that capitalism has hindered societal progress by distancing the individual from the products of their labour and from their communities, taking away the pride in one's work and in one's community that give a higher meaning to life. When an individual lacks this great calling, either through their work or for the betterment of society, they can feel aimless which in turn can create a rise in various negative emotions.

Emotional determinism is thus an integral part of alienation, as Marx in his earlier works especially furthers the idea of the psychological impact of capitalism. In the daily life of the individual within a capitalist society there is an increasing likelihood of depression, anxiety and other mental health issues, a phenomenon which is increasingly being linked to abstract concepts of 'modernity' and a 'competitive' contemporary environment in western countries. What this fails to highlight, consciously or not, is that it is the inherent alienation of capitalist production and its individualistic shift that is likely the phenomenon's causation. The increasing individualism in capitalist society has expanded beyond the workplace and has alienated all aspects of society, creating a perceived 'human nature' of self-interest and greed and destroying humanities natural desire to coexist and look after one another. In people's daily lives this is manifested in the use of personal vehicles over public transport, relying on deliveries of goods

from multi-national organisations instead of visiting local businesses and lacking empathy for the homeless person they walk past every day. Capitalist Society has shaped the emotional states of its citizenry into unfeeling, individualistic robots who prioritise their own comfort and convenience over the earth and their fellow human beings.

This alienated individual, estranged from their community and anxious towards their future stability in a system defined by its boom-bust cycle, is driven toward competition and suspicion and toward the deafening silence of hyper-individualistic loneliness that has become the norm in western neoliberal society, which, as Fisher will discuss, only exacerbates severe mental health issues. In his magnum opus, Capitalist Realism (2014), Mark Fisher dedicates a significant portion of the book to an analysis of neoliberalism's failure to address alienation and how it has in fact magnified its endemic mental health crisis. He argues that neoliberal 'privatization of distress' has made it acceptable to live in a society that has created unprecedented illness in the minds of its young people, additionally stating that 'capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and the cost of it appearing to work is very high' (Fisher, 2014, p.19); with the cost he is referring to being the sacrificing of the mental health of society's young people. It is now reported that 34% of 18-24 year olds are reported to suffer from 'common mental disorders' (Kelly & Whitworth, 2024), clearly demonstrating a dire situation for society and a sign of extreme difficulty in the lives of vast numbers of individuals. With depression now one of the leading issues facing the NHS in Britain, affecting on average 1 in 10 adults, with a height of 1 in 5 during the second Coronavirus lockdown period of January-March 2021 (Baker & Kirk-Wade, 2024), it is clearly not a personal problem but a society-wide structural issue. Fisher argues that capitalism, and in particular its neoliberal variant introduced by Margaret Thatcher, has not only increased alienation and its effects but also created a society with an individualistic ontology that treats mental health as a personal problem. Fisher (2014, p.21) states '[t]his pathologization already forecloses any possibility of politicization. By privatizing these problems - treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background - any question of social systemic causation is ruled out'. Fisher argues that especially for young people depression is caused by a lack of commitment and purpose, and that neoliberal alienation furthers this through unprecedented chronic job insecurity and the rise of the gig economy. This leaves people anxious about the future and thus unable to enjoy the present. The presence of technology in the workplace and the home as well as a perfected neoliberal socialisation sustains the individual's uneasy relationship to their labour, with a society which has inbuilt internal policing into its citizens struggling to switch off from said internal policing, thus quickly finds itself plagued with anxiety, to the extent that the cultivated 'protestant work ethic' is so eternally imbedded that relaxation feels like a crime. Workers are expected to be always 'on', or as Fisher (2014, p.22) puts it, 'working from home, homing from work'. The working class in modern society are expected to be loyal to a business that does not care for them, to be a 'willing slave'. Western neoliberal society has thus become a dominating force of authoritarianism and uncertainty, suppressing feelings of exhaustion and forcing a fake self to serve to the customer, workplaces encourage the burying of true emotion which damages its labour force and creates a sick society of depressed and anxious people, a future which is unsustainable. The workers of society, the vast majority of its citizenry, are now at risk of

emotional breakdown. If it is indeed societal forces that dictate an individual's emotional state then it is henceforth abundantly clear that drastic societal upheaval is necessary.

Marx demonstrated that the capitalist mode of production creates an alienated workforce that feel disconnected from their product and from their colleagues which increases loneliness and mental health issues. Fisher Built on this by showing how the neoliberal development of capitalism only further isolates citizens of capitalist nations and how lack of direction and insecurity can create anxiety and depression for many including the youth.
So how do we fix this? If I were to summarise the entirety of Marxian thought into one answer, I'd say we solve the issue by overthrowing capitalism. I'd say we have to imagine a society without class distinction, without the authoritarian rule of our bosses, landlords and the entire privatised, sick system, and then I'd say we we have to fight for that future. For the liberation of the proletariat and for the wellness of the future of humanity and the planet.

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